

South Dakota National Guard

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Women Soldiers take on unexpected roles

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SPEARFISH, S.D. – You might not expect a local female hair stylist or preschool teacher is operating or fixing bulldozers, scrapers and dump trucks outside of their job, but for women serving in the South Dakota Army National Guard's 842nd Engineer Company it's common.

These female Soldiers are breaking the stereotypes of what it means to serve as a woman in today's National Guard, and they serve in unexpected roles.

"More and more female Soldiers are enlisting in positions that have been traditionally perceived as male only positions, such as heavy equipment operator or diesel mechanic within the 842nd," said Capt. Matt Sadler, 842nd commander. "I've also seen other company's within the state showing the same trend, females enlisting as truck drivers, artillery, etc."

Of the unit's approximately 160 members, 31 are women. Most serve as heavy equipment operators or heavy wheeled-vehicle mechanics. Based in Spearfish, Belle Fourche and Sturgis, the unit is a horizontal construction company that uses heavy machinery to build roads, airstrips and combat outposts and forward operating bases.

"Working with loaders and scrapers is a bit out of my comfort zone," said Pfc. Jessica Kling, who teaches preschool in Lemmon and operates heavy equipment in the 842nd. "I wouldn't choose to do this in my civilian life, but the National Guard gives me the opportunity to do something new and exciting."

These engineers also serve the state in the event of emergencies such as building levees during flood operations, digging fire lines to suppress wildland fires and assisting emergency crews during winter storms.

"I never would have imagined doing any of this before I joined," said Kling. "I figured I'm a girl, I don't need to do that kind of stuff, but once you start it's kind of fun."

Operating large equipment such as an excavator, a 24,000 pound machine, capable of digging 14 feet deep, can make these women feel empowered.

"High and mighty," said Kling, on how she feels when operating the large powerful road graders, bulldozers and excavators. "They are really intimidating at first... I think everyone has felt that way."

For most Soldiers, the intimidation factor tends to fade after spending two weeks behind the wheel during annual training.

“I’ve learned the most at annual training,” said Kling. “There is a lot of work and planning that goes into building a road. I didn’t know I was capable of doing this, and once you see the end result it’s pretty cool.”

For many of the women who work full time in what many people might consider traditional female careers, they get surprised or shocked reactions when explaining their job as Soldiers to their customers.

“Whenever I have a client in my chair and they ask about my life outside of cosmetology school, I tell them I am a construction worker in the National Guard,” said Pfc. Savannah Wheeler, of Box Elder. “Their faces drop and they are like ‘What?’”

Choosing to be a mechanic in the National Guard wasn’t a surprise for the family members of Spc. Kayleigh Lane, of Sturgis, who owns her own hair salon in Belle Fourche.

“As a child, I grew up working on cars with my dad,” said Lane. “Mechanical work intrigues me, but I didn’t want to do it full time, so I figured the National Guard would be the best way to do it.”

Many of the women joined as mechanics in the 842nd to become more educated in maintaining and repairing vehicles. Heavy wheeled mechanics spend 13 weeks at advanced individual training learning how automotive engines work and how to trouble shoot to repair mechanical problems.

“I wanted to be a mechanic to learn how to fix my own car,” said Wiyaka Stands, of Mission. “My car broke down in high school and it’s expensive to fix, so I wanted to learn how to do it myself.”

The women of the 842nd say they have grown personally and professionally and would recommend other women considering an engineer job to join their ranks.

“Operating outside of my comfort zone has given me confidence,” said Wheeler. “That is why I would suggest women join the 842nd. This unit has allowed me to push my boundaries and accomplish things I never thought I’d do.”

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High resolution photos are available at www.flickr.com/photos/southdakotationalguard



150411-Z-ZZ999-001: From left: U.S. Army Pvt. Tara Schmander, of Rapid



150411-Z-CW157-001: From left: U.S. Army Spc. Kayleigh Lane, of Sturgis, Spc. Wiyaka Stands, of Mission, Spc. Rachel Newton, of Spearfish, Sgt. Danielle Walraven, of Lemmon, take a moment during their day to explain what it is like to be heavy wheeled mechanics in the South Dakota Army National Guard’s 842nd Engineer Company April 11, 2015, at the Sturgis maintenance shop. Many of the women joined as mechanics in the 842nd to serve in different and challenging roles. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. 1st Class Theanne Herrmann/Released)



141004-A-XL372-016: U.S. Army Pfc. Jessica Kling, a horizontal construction engineer with the South Dakota Army National Guard's 842nd Engineer Company takes commands from her ground guide while backing up a dump truck during the Battle of the Blades training exercise in Spearfish, S.D., Oct. 4, 2014. Many of the women joined as equipment operators in the 842nd to serve in different and challenging roles. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Patrick Wolfe/Released)



141004-A-XL372-004: U.S. Army Sgt. Karen Berger, a horizontal construction engineer in the South Dakota Army National Guard's 842nd Engineer Company measures the depth dug by a D7H bulldozer operator during the Battle of the Blades training exercise in Spearfish, S.D., Oct. 4, 2014. Many of the women joined as equipment operators in the 842nd to serve in different and challenging roles. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Patrick Wolfe/Released)



141004-A-XL372-007: U.S. Army Sgt. Anna Bingham of Rapid City, a horizontal construction engineer in the South Dakota Army National Guard's 842nd engineer Company guides a driver where to dump dirt during the Battle of the Blades training exercise in Spearfish, S.D., Oct. 4, 2014. Many of the women joined as equipment operators in the 842nd to serve in different and challenging roles. (U.S. Army National Guard photo by Sgt. Patrick Wolfe/Released)

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